Philippe Bornet

Visual Encounters with a Significant Other: The Travels of Maria Bambina from Italy to India (and Beyond)

Abstract. The chapter analyses the transnational life of an image of the child Mary as it travelled from Italy to India around the end of the nineteenth century. The first section sketches out some methodological and theoretical considerations. The second part recounts the image's origins, as it was modelled in wax by a Franciscan nun around 1735, and its development in Italy with the Sisters of Charity, and then across Europe through ecclesiastical networks. In the third section, the contribution deals with the image's appropriation in South India, and especially in the region of Mangalore (Karnataka, India). Retaining some of the characteristics of the "original" image (in particular, its relation to health), the Indian context gave it additional dimensions: a relation to harvests, a celebration with many elements borrowed from a South Indian Hindu framework, and a specific relation to the Konkani-speaking Roman Catholic community of Mangalore. Comparing European and Indian evidence, the chapter concludes by asking to what extent the image's usage in both contexts reflects (or not) different visual cultures.

Keywords. Mary, South India, Catholicism, Hinduism, Sisters of Charity

1 Reconstructing the connected histories of religious images and objects

The case explored in this chapter came to my attention by chance when doing research in Karnataka back in 2014.[1] I was struck by an important procession featuring an image that looked both familiar and foreign, an image of the Infant Mary, or Maria Bambina, borrowed from North Italy but set in a context of performance that was entirely local. The present contribution examines the history of

1 My warms thanks to Prof. Vivek Rai for first introducing me to that tradition, to Dr Kranti Farias for her precious help in assembling the pieces of this puzzle and to Dr Paola von Wyss-Giacosa for her valuable comments on an earlier draft. All inconsistencies and mistakes remain fully mine.

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this encounter and its implications, starting with a few preliminary methodological considerations.

In his pioneering study of the role of images in the conquest of Mexico, Serge Gruzinski highlights the fact that Christian missionaries did all they could not only to replace local images by Christian iconography—such as the Virgin Mary—but also to make sure that Christian images were considered as mere signifiers of something else, and no more.[2] While succeeding with the importation of Christian iconography, the missionaries failed to limit the images' performance to a purely mnemonic dimension, as is witnessed by the great popularity of the Virgin of Guadalupe in South America up to present times, which retains many aspects of pre-Christian traditions. This example shows the eminently versatile character of images, implying that tracing the history of a specific image requires one to deal not only with the intentions of its creator(s) but also with the history of its mediatisation and reception in diverse social, political, and religious contexts. It is also reminiscent of the approach of "connected histories" that Gruzinski and Sanjay Subrahmanyam have formalised; that is, to "reconnect" documents and archives that represent different sides of the same phenomenon in the manner of an electrician reconnecting electrical wires.[3] The goal is to go against Eurocentric or nationalist biases in the writing of history and to connect the micro and macro levels, using a lens that looks at global issues arising in detailed histories of individuals or objects.

While individual lives, especially those of actors who have moved across borders and cultures, have received increased attention of late,[4] the study of images and objects has not attracted as much scholarly consideration. However, images and objects are privileged candidates for such an approach because they travel easily across cultural contexts and are quick to take up new meanings and functions. The three dimensions outlined by Hans Belting in his proposal for a visual anthropology can provide a helpful guideline in this pluri-contextual exploration of an image's biography in (1) the way images (and the message they carry) are adapted to a new situation; (2) the role of the medium carrying the images, im-

2 Gruzinski 2001a: 66: "An image of the Virgin was not God, no more than it could be confused with the virgin herself. It was only an instrument of remembrance and memory. The Christian West had long known of this pedagogical and mnemonic function assigned to the image."

3 Gruzinski 2001b: 87: "Faced with realities to be necessarily grasped on multiple scales, the historian should transform himself into a sort of electrician, capable of re-establishing the continental and intercontinental connections that national historiographies have long been ingenious at disconnecting or retracting by waterproofing their borders" (my translation). See also Subrahmanyam 2005.

4 E.g. Deacon et al. 2010; Gamsa 2017; Bornet 2021.

pacting their reception and circulation; and (3) the perception of images by human actors interacting with them.[5]

We will pay particular attention to these dimensions in our analysis of different stages of Maria Bambina's travels. In the first section we will first look at the Italian context of the image's production, and will consider then its dissemination in Europe, among both clerical institutions and individuals. In the second we will analyse aspects of its reception in India, focusing particularly on the region of Mangalore, Karnataka.

2 Maria Bambina's early career

2.1 Phase 1: Italian convents

While representations of the Infant Mary have been popular since late antiquity, the image that interests us here is more recent. The statue (*simulacro*) was modelled in wax in 1735 by Isabella Chiara Fornari (1697–1744), the Franciscan Superior Nun of the Todi convent in the region of Perugia. The tradition of modelling effigies in wax was not particularly new at the time. The practice is well attested in Italy and in northern Europe at least since the thirteenth century and particularly appreciated for the great corporeal realism of the depicted effigy.[6] The making of the statue should also be recontextualised within a tradition of piety devoted to the Infant Jesus, especially popular within congregations of nuns since the late Middles Ages.[7] Noteworthy in that first stage of the iconography is the way the Infant is swaddled very tightly with bands: a practice with a long history and well documented in the Italian context,[8] but soon to be questioned, for example by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Émile* (1762).

Fornari's wax effigy was offered to the bishop of Como, Alberico Simonetta (1694–1739), in 1738. In turn, he had a replica made in terracotta and gave it to

5 Belting 2011: 9–36.

6 See Freedberg 1999: 227 and his emphasis on wax as not only a cheap material to sculpt with but as achieving "verisimilitude": "By using wax (or related substances like papier-mache and boiled leather), one could achieve the closest possible approximation of real flesh." See also Jagla 2019: 62: "Consequently, wax was considered a substance with miraculous, extraordinary, magical, and health-giving properties and even having an apotropaic power; hence, making a wax votive item meant the creation of an object of extraordinary power."

7 On this practice and the history of its interpretations, see Rublack 1994: 43.

8 See the following example in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, dated 1600–1625, https://www.vandaimages.com/2006AL3755-Swaddling-band-Italy-17th-century.html (28/01/2022).

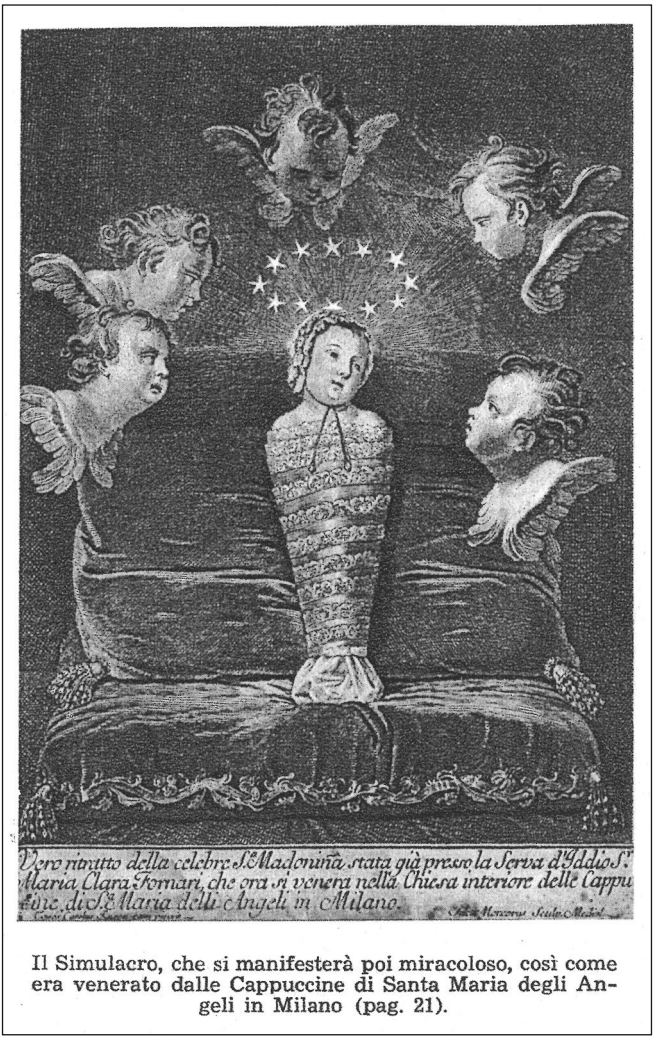

Figure 1 Image from the leaflet *Esercizio spirituale da farsi nel giorno otto d'ogni mese, ossia, Coroncina in onore della santissima infanzia di Maria* (1757), reproduced in *Il Simulacro e il Santuario di Maria Bambina* 1959, p. 14. Caption reads: "True portrait of the famous S. Madoninna which was once in the care of the Servant of God, Sr. Maria Clara Fornari, now venerated in the interior church of the Cappucine convent of S. Maria degli Angeli in Milan". Reproduced with permission of the Istituto delle Suore di Carità.

the Capuchin convent of Santa Maria di Angeli in Milan.[9] Simonetta gifted the copy saying that it was for the "education of the youth and the teaching of the Christian doctrine, especially the first rule of Saint Clare"[10]—obedience, poverty, and chastity. However, the actual use of the statue shows that it was also, and perhaps especially, considered in its function of intercessor and support for spiritual experiences. A few healings are already reported at this point and a leaflet entitled "Spiritual Exercise to be Done in the Honour of Mary's Nativity and Infancy Every Eighth Day of a Month" was published in 1757, with an engraving showing the Infant Mary effigy (Fig. 1).

At this stage, venerated and prayed at in a standing position, the image represented a way for its guardians to develop a privileged relation to the saint rather than directly to the deity. It did not only have an impact on the inner spiritual life of a community of female practitioners but also provided them with a device for intercession that attracted prominent people outside their community.[11]

2.2 Phase 2: Settling with the "Sisters of Charity" in medical institutions

In 1782 the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, Joseph II (1741–1790), suppressed the Capuchin convent—an effect of his "Edict on Idle Institutions"—and the nuns sought refuge in another institution, the Augustinian convent of San Filippo Neri in Milan. The wax effigy remained there for a few years, until the transformation of the convent into a military hospital and its subsequent suppression in 1810 under the Napoleonian regime. It is not exactly clear what happened for the next thirty years. The statue re-emerged in 1842 in the hands of Teresa Bosio, the Mother General of the Sisters of Charity at the time—a congregation or "institute" founded in 1832 in Lovere by Bartolomea Capitanio (1807–1833) and Vincenza Gerosa (1784–1847) which was devoted to providing education to young girls and relief to the sick. Sisters of that congregation had been called to Milan to assist a hospital.[12] The effigy of Maria Bambina was exposed in the hospital's chapel and was celebrated every year by the Sisters and the sick. It thus

9 Upon the request of the Capuchin nuns, the original figure was returned to the same convent after Simonetta's death in 1739.

10 *Il Simulacro e il Santuario* 1959: 20. The first rule states: "To observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, by living in obedience, without anything of one's own, and in chastity."

11 For example, the marquis Alessandro Erba Odescalchi (1677–1757) reported that he had been healed by the nuns' prayers to the Mary effigy and became a benefactor of the convent. *Il Simulacro e il Santuario* 1959: 20.

12 See Carraro/Mascotti 1987–1991 for a comprehensive history of this institution.

Figure 2 Maria Bambina, Istituto delle Suore di Carità, Milan. *Source:* https://www.suoredimariabambina.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/maria-bambina.jpg. Reproduced with permission of the Istituto delle Suore di Carità.

gained a more functional role: not only as a support for prayer or teaching but also as actively helping the healing process, as a complement to the kind of medicine practised in the hospital. It is at this point that the statue was displayed as lying in a cradle and not standing.

In 1876 the Bambina was moved to the new location of the Sisters' headquarters, on Via Santa Sofia in Milan, where it remains today (after a few further tribulations).[13] In 1884 the Mother Superior of the institute, Teodolinda Nazari (1836–1888), decided to restore the effigy and decorate it with precious stones. The clothes of the Infant are no longer a tight swaddle, as in the first, rather austere staging of the statue, but clothes made of a lush fabric, embellished by golden bands. The bed itself has become a lavishly decorated frame for the statue. Most importantly, the Infant's body is entirely concealed, except for her face, inevitably inviting direct visual contact with her eyes (Fig. 2). And indeed, when taking care of a task related to this restoration project, a novice working on it was so fascinated by the Bambina's eyes that she had to blindfold her in order to finish her task.[14]

13 *Il Simulacro e il Santuario* 1959: 25; Angelillo 2019: 206.
14 *Il Simulacro e il Santuario* 1959: 26.

At this point, the effigy started to be associated with supernatural events. On 8 September, the day of Mary's birth, one sister who had been paralysed for months requested to have the effigy on her bed for the night. The next day, she was suddenly healed. Another sick sister was healed by merely looking at the Bambina on the same day, and still others were healed in a similar fashion. In 1885 the statue is said to have miraculously changed its colour, becoming more colourful, more vivid, more alive.[15]

2.3 Phase 3: Spreading across Europe—institutions and individuals

With such stories circulating quickly, crowds began to flock to Milan to see the effigy. The local liberal press, such as the newspaper *Il secolo: Gazzetta di Milano* mocked the practice, saying that "the cult of the idol and the much advertised miracles are resolved in the hunt for offerings and alms; rumours of miracles are spread in order to better spill money to the gulls".[16] Notwithstanding the criticism, the effigy was brought to a chapel inside the Mother Superior's house and presented to the public for devotion and pilgrimage in 1888. In 1904, as a sign of the Bambina's growing popularity, the Mother Superior Ángela Ghezzi (1854–1918) obtained authorisation to organise a coronation from Pope Pius X (1835–1914) and offered him a facsimile reproduction. A solemn and well-attended ceremony was performed, and the statue received a crown. The iconography produced after this date shows, indeed, a richly ornated diadem or crown atop the Infant's head.

The same period saw what might be called the "commodification" of the Bambina. Images were printed, and copies of the statue made, along with postcards, oil for lamps, strips of cotton blessed and touched to the Bambina's face, and medals meant to be sewn on pillows or mattresses.[17] In addition, an institute founded in

15 For the narration of these events, see *Il Simulacro e il Santuario* 1959: 27.

16 "Un capitolo della storia delle superstizioni", *Il secolo: Gazzetta di Milano*, 26–27 June 1885, p. 3. The full text reads: "There are those who hang the shirts of the sick from the gilded cradle containing the wax idol, trusting that by gilding them they will be cured. There are others who carry the sick children to her: there are candles and vows hung on the walls where the doll is venerated: and no one has the courage to protest the supercilious interests of those who started the new holy store. The cult of the idol and the much-advertised miracles are resolved in the hunt for offerings and alms; rumours of miracles are spread to better spill money to the gulls" (my translation).

17 As referred to in an article in *Il Popolo Cattolico*, 12 September 1885. On these "simpler" reproductions, see Freedberg 1999: 121: "When we survey the prayer cards, badges, and terracotta tokens—indeed, the whole class of simpler reproduction—we are likely to be struck by just how telling are these adaptations of high and fancy art. Pretty soon we notice how the image is adorned or simplified, embellished or rendered more schematic, made

1893 in Brescia began to print a periodical entitled *Sorrisi e vagiti di Maria Santissima Bambina* ("Smiles and Wails of the Santissima Maria Bambina") with the support of the Pope Leon XIII (1810–1903), and distributed it across the whole country.[18]

All this contributed not only to the further spread of the effigy's fame but also opened the door to new interpretations and individual uses of it: fellow sisters and priests from various countries asked for reproductions. Statues reached the networks of Carmelite, Benedictine, and Franciscan convents, starting with that of the Carmelite Sisters of Laval in France (which organised the distribution of thousands of medals), and then to convents in Vienna, Lourdes, Avranches, Namur (Belgium), and so on. A priest from the Swiss canton Ticino hired a painter to paint a scene of the Santa Bambina in his church; a Benedictine sister from Nimes (France) asked for a real-size copy of the image; and the Sisters of Charity in Waterford (Ireland) asked for a photograph.[19]

Along with its diffusion among ecclesiastical institutions, the statue was also used by some remarkable individuals who began to develop an idiosyncratic relation with her. One case was of a certain Marie Mesmin (1867–1935) of Bordeaux who had visited the sanctuary in Lourdes in 1904 and brought back a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes which wept frequently. Her statue was confiscated by the Church in 1911, but the Italian sisters gifted her a statue of the Maria Bambina to compensate for her loss. It was made in plaster and, as it happens, the miraculous weeping resumed. Mesmin herself had visions of the Virgin, communicated them to people who came to see her, and attracted a small circle of followers.[20]

With all this, the Bambina went public: she had found her way out of the small world of a congregation of sisters, discovered new audiences, and taken on new meanings. She was "validated" at the highest ecclesiastical level, other clerics in Europe became eager to associate themselves with her, derivative objects for individual use were created, and some individuals saw in her a source of legitimation for their idiosyncratic visions and supernatural experiences.

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more wooden or more sugary. This in itself provides insight into the aesthetic expectations and preoccupations of the people who buy such images (even though they may well declare that all they want is a reproduction of the image at the shrine)."

18 *Il Simulacro e il Santuario* 1959: 42–43.

19 *Il Simulacro e il Santuario* 1959: 50–51.

20 On this curious case, see Christian 2013: 80–85. It illustrates the ambiguity surrounding the ecclesiastical response to the Maria Bambina and the extraordinary events and visions reported about her, between endorsement (when supernatural events would happen within a controlled context) and hostility (when it gave authority to individuals with idiosyncratic views that could not easily be reintegrated into the Church's fold).

3 Maria Bambina in South India

3.1 Mary's popularity in South India

Let us now move to the Bambina's career in South Asia and especially in South India. Before dealing specifically with her, however, it is necessary to note first the impressive popularity of Mary in this region, even before the arrival of the Portuguese among Syriac Christian communities. Soon after they arrived in India in 1498, the Portuguese—who were also responsible for the evangelisation of foreign countries under the Padroado regime—did all they could to attract the natives to Christianity.[21] Mary was an essential device in this process, not only in her capacity of protector of maritime travel as *Stella Maris*, but also as a precious link between the Roman Catholic missionaries and the Indian Syriac Christian communities.[22] As Susan Bayly has argued in a classic work, and despite the caution missionaries exerted in orienting the interpretation of Christian symbols, the native eyes quickly appropriated and re-semantised Mary. As a motherly figure that heals, protects, and controls fertility, she became naturally associated to local goddesses acting as sources of supernatural power, supports for popular devotion, and carers of a community or a village (*grāmadevāta*) such as Mariamman, Sateri, Bhumika, Kelbai, and others. The veneration of Mary was certainly not reserved to Christians, a point particularly clear in the case of Our Lady of Health celebrated in Vailankanni, Tamil Nadu—a shrine initiated by Indians and renowned for having saved Portuguese sailors from a sure death: in this case, Mary was no longer a device to evangelise the Indians but had become an Indian figure that saved the Portuguese themselves.[23]

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21 See Bayly 1989: 278: "When the Padroado missionaries introduced images of the Virgin Mary into Kerala in the sixteenth century, these too became a focus for cult veneration among the Syrians. At Mavelikkara, a celebrated image of the Virgin was paraded with music and banners during the church's annual festival: the priests and 'chief men of the church' carried the image in procession and halted at pandals (canopied ceremonial enclosures) before each house where cash offerings were made."

22 Bayly 1989: 278.

23 See Bayly 1989: 368: "At the celebrated shrine of Our Lady of Health at Velankanni worshippers from all castes and religious communities share in the cult of the shrine's miraculous local Virgin. This shrine is famous for its powers of healing and exorcism, and is thought to have been a popular pilgrimage place since the early seventeenth century. According to local tradition the shrine was not founded by missionaries, but by a group of devotees who had formed up around an image of the Virgin possessing miraculous medicinal powers." See also the movie *Annai Velankanni* (1971), which features the shrine and shows its almost complete "Indianisation", depicting, for example, Mary as an astrologist giving her blessing about a forthcoming wedding.

3.2 Phase 4: Helping the Sisters of Charity in India

We saw that derivative objects and images of Maria Bambina had started to circulate within Europe by the end of the nineteenth century. The Bambina's global career, however, started with the missionary activities of the Italian Sisters of Charity in Argentina, Australia, Brazil, India, Mexico, Poland, and the United States. Invited by Jesuit fathers in Bengal to contribute to the education of girls, four Italian sisters of the Sisters of Charity community were sent from Milan to Bengal in 1860.[24] In Krishnagar (Bengal), they had to follow the new British policies about missionaries adopted after the 1857 Revolt—policies that mostly restricted missionary activities to charitable work—but this was actually the work they were doing back in Italy already.[25] They started an orphanage and provided medical assistance and education by organising schools for young brides.

In a letter of 1887, Sister Cecilia Uetz (1831–1889) reported that the Ganges had flooded many villages around Krishnagar. She indicated that Protestant missionaries, probably of the Church Missionary Society, tried to take advantage of the event to prove the superiority of their doctrine over that of the Catholics. The sisters prayed to the Bambina and made an embroidery with her image to be displayed in a little chapel. As a result, we are told, the Ganges retreated, specifically spared the fields of the converts, and everything was brought under control—including the ambitions of rival missionary societies. To thank the Bambina, the sisters organised a procession, dressed her for the occasion and decorated her with flowers and rice.[26] Another Italian sister, Giuseppina Brambilla (?–1890), came to Bengal in 1888 and contributed to spreading more widely the devotion to the Bambina: medals that she had distributed were reported to have performed several miracles, and she had translated the Novena[27] into English (not Bengali) and printed and distributed it to various households.[28] In another (unspecified) location, the Bambina changed the minds of local villagers so that women could also convert to Christianity if they so wanted.[29]

24 Angelillo 2019: 207.

25 For a general survey of cultural relations between India and Italy, see Leucci et al. 2018.

26 *Il Simulacro e il Santuario* 1959: 51–52.

27 A Novena is a series of prayers dedicated to a specific saint to be recited on every day of the nine-day period preceding the saint's festival.

28 Prevedello 1945: 182 (my translation): "The Provincial, Sr Giuseppina Brambilla, has the merit of having established in India the veneration of the Holy Child Mary, bringing to it the enthusiasm and devotion that the miracles that are still recent had aroused in hearts. [. . .] Soon this devout homage was rewarded by the Queen herself [Mary!] with an extraordinary healing in favour of a convert belonging to the English Ladies of Our Lady of Loreto in Darjeeling, where the Provincial was a guest for treatment." The choice of English (and not Bengali) for the translation of the Novena might be related to the fact that one of the sisters' activities consisted in educating higher caste women (Carraro/Mascotti 1987–1991, vol. 1: 229).

29 *Il Simulacro e il Santuario* 1959: 82–83.

Such anecdotes show that the image had become a powerful instrument in the hands of an otherwise marginalised group of Italian sisters living in remote Bengal and lacking proper preparation for working in such a location. As an image functionally similar to other local deities and available in various material forms, it was easily recognised as having significant symbolical power and could be used in different kinds of performances, individual and collective. In a rather hostile environment, it gave the sisters a modest—but real—competitive advantage over other religious societies.

3.3 Phase 5: The arrival of the Bambina in Mangalore

Let us focus now on the specific region of Mangalore in current Karnataka. The local Roman Catholic community traces its origins back to Goa and says it emigrated to the south to escape various threats such as the Inquisition during the sixteenth century. It also describes itself as originally a group of Konkani-speaking Gaud Saraswati Brahmins who had converted to Christianity under Franciscan, then Jesuit influence. Therefore, many sociocultural traits of that caste, such as wedding rituals, were preserved in the community's ritual practices.[30] The first Catholic Church of the region was built by the Portuguese when they arrived in Mangalore, as early as 1568: the Rosario Cathedral in Bolar.[31] An important chapter of the community's history is the captivity of its members in Seringapatam during the reign of Tipu Sultan which ended with his defeat and death at the hands of the British in 1799. Since then, the region has seen various Catholic institutions coming to its shores from Europe: for instance, the Carmelites since 1838 and the Jesuits since 1879, the latter of which founded a renowned school, the St Aloysius

30 On which see Silva/Fuchs 1965.

31 On the foundation of the Bolar church and the figure of Our Lady of the Rosary, see the following hymn reported by Silva/Fuchs 1965: 7–8, which features a notion of Mary very much reminiscent of a Hindu Devī Mātā:

> 1. Our mother came from Goa. It was the mother of the Rosary. She was with loose hair on her head. Thus attired, she went down in the sea. The mother was drowned in the sea.
> 2. She came to Mangalore. She came to Mangalore. And went to Bolar. She has made her home in the Bolar region, And with the grace of God Has given us shelter.
> 3. Let us all here meet together And build a shrine In honour of our mother, Lady of the Rosary.
> 4. A shrine is built, and in it what sound With the ringing of bells! All is splendour there. On the spot where the shrine is built How much light is there, With the burning of candles!
> 5. All are jubilant. What noise in the shrine! The prayers are recited, With much singing and music, All are at her feet.

College. The community managed to avail for itself important positions in the colonial administration and represented the bulk of Indian Christians in Karnataka: according to official censuses, in 1901 Mangalorean Catholics accounted for 76,000 out of a total of about 84,000 Christians in South Canara, making the Protestant community related to the activities of the Basel Mission—which had its Indian headquarters in Mangalore—a small minority.[32]

In 1883, the German Jesuit Father Augustus Müller (1841–1910), an influential promoter of homeopathy in India, founded a small hospital in Kankanady, Mangalore. Needing help for his hospital, he asked the Swiss Italian bishop of Mangalore, Abbondio Cavadini (1846–1910), to provide him with staff members. Bishop Cavadini managed to get four Italian Sisters of Charity sent from Milan in 1898 to take care of leprosy patients at Father Müller's hospital. Since they lacked any knowledge of English and Konkani, Father Müller turned them away, and the Sisters ended up opening an orphanage in the small neighbouring village of Jeppu, where they would later start a novitiate for Indian women. In 1912, after Father Müller's death, the Sisters were called back to the Kankanady hospital.[33]

As mentioned above, the figure of Mary was already very popular even before the arrival of the Sisters of Charity. More specifically, the Roman Catholic community were greatly devoted to Our Lady of the Rosary (to which the Bolar cathedral is consecrated) as well as to Our Lady of Miracles (to which another important Catholic church in Mangalore, the Milagres church is consecrated), not to mention Mary of Lourdes, the Immaculate Conception, which came with the arrival of the Jesuits in 1879.[34] Quite naturally, the Sisters brought with them a replica of the Maria Bambina statue—"companion and teacher of the Sisters, mediator of grace for all"[35]—and the first stone of a chapel dedicated to her in Jeppu was laid in 1906 (for an inauguration in 1910).[36] In addition, further derivative images and objects featuring the Maria Bambina were produced locally (Fig. 3). All this added

32 Burn et al. 1908: 360. See Farias 1999: 120–151 for the impact of various Christian groups on different aspects of the society in Canara.

33 For details about this community, which has recently celebrated its 125th anniversary, see http://mlore.sccg.in (15/10/2021).

34 As to the devotion towards Mary in the region, see for example the article "Lourdes in Mangalore", *The Mangalore Magazine* 1/2, Easter 1898, p. 56, which mentions a statue of the Lourdes Immaculate Conception venerated in a dedicated grotto, but not of Maria Bambina.

35 *Il Simulacro e il Santuario* 1959: 51: "Una copia del Santo Simulacro le [*sic.* the Sisters] accompagnava in ogni nuova fondazione; ormai non si apriva più una Casa senza che vi trovasse il suo posto di onore: vi entrava sempre, compagna e maestre delle Suore, mediatrice di grazia per tutto."

36 See Prevedello 1945: 405–406 on the S. Maria Bambina Chapel in Mangalore started in 1906 and officially inaugurated in 1910. The replica still remains in the Infant Mary Convent Chapel, next to Jeppu Seminary.

Figure 3 Figurine of Maria Bambina in clay owned by Dr Kranti Farias, gifted to her by Denis Brito in the 1980s. Reproduced with permission of Dr Kranti Farias.

yet another aspect to the already well-developed devotion to Mary within the local Roman Catholic community.

Early in the twentieth century, the Bambina escaped the walls of the missionary institution. It was included in one of the community's most significant yearly celebrations, probably more important than Christmas itself: the festival of Monti Fest celebrated on the day of Mary's nativity beginning with the nine preceding days. It is probably not a coincidence that these dates are extremely close to major festivals in the region. There is first the Gaṇeśa Caturthī, which celebrates the birth of Ganesh and is particularly popular in Goa: a joyful festival celebrated with parades, flowers, and pandals, and including the blessing of the first rice and a communal vegetarian meal. During the same period, Janmāṣṭami (or Gokul Aṣṭami), which celebrates Lord Krishna's birthday, is fervently celebrated in South India and associated with various celebrations of the harvests.

Monti Fest directly echoes these popular festivals and includes allusions to important episodes of the community's past. It was probably created as a Christian version of one or the other Hindu festival we have just mentioned, in the context of Jesuit activity in Goa.[37] While officially consecrated to Mary's birth, it is first a celebration of harvests and involves the blessing of the new paddy, the decoration of the Infant Mary with flowers during the nine days preceding the festival, and a vegetarian meal of nine dishes. The festival is also the occasion to remember the community's past and the escape from captivity under the rule of Tipu Sultan, since it reportedly was the first ritual celebrated after the captivity ended: a symbol of resilience after a traumatic experience. The addition of the Bambina in

37 See Henn 2014 for the context of Hindu–Catholic relations in Goa (esp. pp. 40–64 on the role of images in that context, and pp. 87–88 on the Gaud Saraswat community). No mention is made, however, of the Monti festival. About the history of Monti Fest, see the sketch proposed by Naik 2021 and in particular the mention of the Maria Bambina statue in relation with the Sisters of Charity.

Figures 4 and **5** Maria Bambina at the Monti Feast 2014, Mangalore. *Source:* The author's personal photograph.

Figure 6 Maria Bambina in the Monti Feast, London 2020. Reproduced with the permission of the South Kanara Association (SKA London).

the beginning of the twentieth century reinforced these different aspects: fertility, health, and resilience.

In terms of iconography in the South Indian context, it is striking that the Infant Mary's lavishly ornate crib (recall Fig. 2) is generally lacking. The main attribute is rather that of flowers and vegetation in general, reflecting the theme of fertility (Fig. 4 and 5). A European richly decorated cradle is not seen as a necessary attribute for the image to perform its function. With this development, Maria Bambina has become an important identity marker for the Konkani-speaking Roman Catholic community. The thaumaturgic functions are no longer so central in that specific context, and the connection to Italy seems to be somewhat secondary: she is before everything else a symbol that all group members can recognise.

3.4 Phase 6: On the road again

Since the Konkani-speaking Catholic community has moved around a fair amount, first to Mumbai and then to various parts of the world,[38] the Bambina followed its members to the diaspora. The Monti Fest is indeed celebrated among international expatriate communities of people coming from the Kanara region across the world, in the Gulf countries, Israel, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, Africa, and beyond.[39] Naturally enough, the festival in each place displays prominently the Bambina's image, in its unmistakeably South Indian cultural form (Fig. 6).

38 See Menezes 2021 on the successful career of a member of that community in England; see Pinto 2005–2006 on the diaspora in Mumbai.

39 See e.g. Pereira 2016; "Salalah" 2018; Naik 2020.

4 Conclusion: Images and objects as Ariadne's threads in a global history of religious processes

Let us now conclude with a few observations about the successive visual encounters that have marked the long life of the Maria Bambina effigy. First, the present case underlines the power of images, and particularly of that specific image, for the uplifting of marginalised groups: groups of women, initially belonging to a contemplative order, having to face various setbacks and working in predominantly male environments; Italian Sisters in remote Bengal and Karnataka (and elsewhere); and the Konkani-speaking Roman Catholic community itself, which has been singled out for its heterodox practices by the Roman Catholic Church. The image has thus proved surprisingly resilient, in both European and South Asian contexts: it has given symbolical power to its guardians, escaped institutional control multiple times, and adapted to unstable and changing social, political, and religious contexts.[40]

Second, the adaptation of the image to fit new contexts of performance is remarkable. The most obvious aspect is of course the "translation" of the image into a South Indian religious idiom, by which it became an identity marker for a specific group. But there were adaptation processes earlier as well, as in the move from convents to hospitals, or from being subject to a collective or individual practice.[41] In addition, the image moved across different media and physical forms, from wax to terracotta and plaster, and copies and derivative products were produced in large quantities. In these different cases, the copy seems (almost) as efficient as the original, and in South India, the very idea of an "original" in Italy does not have much importance.[42] Despite these various adaptations, the visual relation to the image is strikingly similar between the European practices that we have surveyed and the image's use in India. As Belting notes, the cross-cultural perspective is crucially important in the study of images: "[I]mages unfold their full potential only when seen in cross-cultural perspective, for then contradictions come to light between

40 Cf. Freedberg 1999: 120 for a similar observation: "In short, it is not just the Virgin, or Saint Francis or the dead or risen Christ, but rather the Virgin or the Saint Francis or the dead or risen Christ in a specific image to which men and women flock, in which they invest their hopes, and to which they give thanks. And the reason for this has not only to do with local pride or economic good sense: it has, in profound ways, to do with how the images look."

41 On individual and collective functions of votive images, see Pezzoli-Olgiati 2011: 35–36.

42 See Freedberg 1999: 124: "In all such cases, we have again to ask ourselves whether the ways in which the archetype is transformed in reproduction has any significant bearing on its felt effectiveness, or whether it is not again largely a matter of consecration or of power derived from contact."

any generic definition and definitions specific to different cultural traditions."[43] The example of Maria Bambina however presses us to go one step further and look not only at specific images in different cultures comparatively but also at how images can be key vectors in processes of cultural hybridisation. This all invites us to exert some caution when generalising about presumed radical differences between European and Indian visual religious cultures. Indeed, the present example certainly suggests that we relativise the cultural specificity of *darśan*—the visual relation to the divine, supposed to be specific to Indian religious cultures—and shift the perspective towards connected or transnational histories of visual cultures.[44] This involves not only looking at the travels of a specific image but also at how foreign or imported attitudes towards images hybridised with local visual cultures—a point that radically undermines any frozen or reified conception of how images are performed in specific cultures or religions.

Third, and finally, the example demonstrates the necessity to study such cases not only across "religions" but also and especially across communities and their respective archives. The "connected" framework that was sketched at the beginning seems particularly relevant here: a single object or image can play the role of a kind of Ariadne's thread to help researchers reconnect distant historiographical traditions.[45] A curious case like this one enables us to think about broader processes in terms that are not centred on the European context and that avoid exoticising non-Western cultures: for example, in terms of the insertion of images within gender-patterned institutional frameworks, of devotional practices as a way to undermine institutional authority, or of the highly ambiguous processes at work in the translation of religious images and practices across different visual cultures.

ORCID®

Philippe Bornet https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6931-7378

43 Belting 2011: 32.

44 For a classical exposition of *darśan* in Hindu traditions, see Eck 1998. See Cort 2012 for a nuanced corrective to Eck's rather monolithic conception of *darśan* in the light of Jain evidence.

45 In that sense, an image plays a role similar to that of proper names, which Ginzburg and Poni describe as guides for recovering singular trajectories through scattered archives (Ginzburg/Poni 1981).

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